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Designing and Delivering Experiential Learning Opportunities: Environmental Law in Action

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Introduction

This paper reports on the experience gained with an undergraduate Law module – LW3372 *Environmental Law: Contemporary Issues in Governance, Regulation and Enforcement* – in the academic year 2018/19. This module incorporates specific features designed to enable students to engage with environmental law ‘in action’ through experiential learning opportunities set in the context of a research-based approach to teaching and learning.

In 2018/19, the module was restructured to map it on to the Connected Curriculum framework adopted by University College Cork (University College Cork, 2018). This involved, in particular, a stronger focus on the research component which forms part of the assessment for the module and more explicit linkages to law ‘in action’, specifically: how to engage Law to solve contemporary societal challenges. The module also sought to draw out and engage with implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a particular focus on Goal 13 Climate Action and Goal 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (UN General Assembly, 2015).



Figure 1: UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The research objective underpinning this project was to explore and report on the experience of implementing selected elements of University College Cork’s Connected Curriculum framework in an

undergraduate module. The project on which this paper is based drew on the detailed framework for curriculum design and renewal developed by Dilly Fung at University College London (UCL) (Fung, 2015). The core principle underpinning UCL's Connected Curriculum initiative is that students learn through research and enquiry.

Method

The approach adopted involved: (1) selecting elements of UCC's Connected Curriculum framework as a particular focus for the design and delivery of the LW3372 module in 2018/19; (2) experimenting with implementation of these elements in the teaching and assessment methods selected for the module; and (3) analysing feedback on the module to gather insights into the student experience.

The following elements of the Connected Curriculum framework selected for implementation in 2018/19 are the focus of this paper: research-based teaching; sustainability (SDGs); and employability.



Figure 1: Connected Curriculum Framework at University College Cork

With a view to delivering research-based teaching and learning, a research project was assigned to students at the beginning of the semester. This project (comprising a 2,500 word report) was worth 40% of the overall assessment for the module. All students received detailed written feedback on their research report. The research project topic in 2018/19 focused on the enforcement strategy adopted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), using the National Priority Sites for

Enforcement initiative as a case study. Students were provided with a selection of primary materials (including legislation, case law, EPA policies and reports).

A guest seminar, delivered by a senior official from the EPA, was designed to support a high level of critical engagement with the material relevant to the research topic. It gave students the opportunity to gain direct, expert insights into the challenges involved in implementing a high level of environmental compliance in practice.

The balance of the assessment (60%) comprised a traditional 1.5 hour examination to test students' ability to apply relevant legal principles to specific scenarios. The approach adopted to teaching the topics selected for summative assessment by way of written examination involved a combination of a case study and problem-based learning approach. For example, the topic 'Access to Environmental Information' drew heavily on a live case involving an appeal that I had brought (in a personal capacity) before the Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Information (the body established by law to determine disputes concerning requests for access to environmental information held by public authorities) (An Taoiseach, 2019). The availability of effective remedies to enforce environmental rights raises important issues around access to justice (SDG 16). It also concerns community engagement in terms of making the public and non-governmental organisations aware of how to use their environmental information rights. These live proceedings, and the associated documentation, provided exceptional material to support research-based teaching in this module. This led to a particularly rich experiential learning opportunity for the class. The 'Climate Action' topic (SDG 13), which also featured in the written examination, focussed on contemporary developments in law and policy in this field nationally and globally, including the University's contribution to climate action and the sustainability agenda (University College Cork, 2019).

The assessment methods selected were designed to develop, assess and document a range of skills valued by employers including: legal research and writing skills; clarity of expression; application of legal principles in practice; critical analysis and the ability to seek out creative solutions to policy challenges.

All seminars were recorded and made available via Panopto after class. This approach meant that students were less fixated on notetaking and more open to engaging in class discussion.

Findings

From observation in class, and feedback received via anonymous questionnaires distributed at the final seminar, it was clear that students were impressed with the strong law 'in action' focus.

Specific points of feedback from students included: class was 'very lively' and 'all topics interesting and easy to follow'. Students appreciated: 'connections to reality of practice and factors influencing policy'; cases unfolding 'in real time'; and opportunities 'to develop practical understanding'. The guest seminar with the EPA was very well received. Students recognised this seminar as a significant learning opportunity.

In the 2018/19 academic year, students performed exceptionally well in the module assessments. Of the 52 candidates who took the summer examination 2019, ten achieved a first class honours grade. Twenty-nine candidates achieved second class honours, grade one; eight achieved

second class honours, grade two; and three candidates scored between 40-46%. Two candidates failed the module at their first attempt, but both were ultimately successful in the autumn supplemental examination 2019.

Conclusions

The Connected Curriculum framework adopted by University College Cork provides a clear roadmap to inform curriculum design and renewal. Experiential learning opportunities, set in the overarching context of research-based teaching, improved the learning experience in this module.

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